

American Institutes for Research

*Academy for Educational
Development*

Aga Khan Foundation

CARE

*Discovery Channel Global Education
Fund*

Education Development Center

Howard University

International Reading Association

*The Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr.
Foundation*

Juárez and Associates, Inc.

Michigan State University

Sesame Workshop

Save the Children Federation, USA

University of Pittsburgh

World Education



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE



ISSUE PAPER
***Perceptions of Namibian Teachers and
Other Stakeholders of Quality of Education***



Produced by:

**American Institutes for Research
under the EQUIP1 LWA**

With:

**Academy for Educational Development
National Institute for Educational Development**

June 2006

**U.S. Agency for International Development
Cooperative Agreement No. GDG-A-00-03-00006-00**

EQUIP1 ISSUE PAPER

PERCEPTIONS OF NAMIBIAN TEACHERS AND OTHER STAKEHOLDERS OF QUALITY OF EDUCATION

by

Karima Barrow, Academy for Educational Development (AED)

Elizabeth Leu, Academy for Educational Development (AED)

Mariana Van Graan, National Institute for Educational
Development (NIED), Namibia

30 JUNE 2006

INTRODUCTION, CONTEXT, AND RELEVANCE

Issues of education quality are prominent in all countries, particularly those that are presently expanding enrolments rapidly toward Education for All goals in 2015. Many of these countries are simultaneously introducing complex reforms in teaching and learning related to more active forms of learning. Rapid expansion, changing paradigms of teaching and learning, and limited resources have led to declining quality of education in many countries.

In the search for ways to improve education quality, the focus is now on understanding complex interactions that take place at the school, classroom, and community levels as the engines of quality. Of the factors that contribute to the quality of basic education at the local level, teachers and quality of teaching are recognized as central, the factor without which other quality inputs are unlikely to be successful (ADEA 2004; ADEA 2005; Anderson 2002; Boyle et al. 2003; Craig et al. 1998; UNESCO 2004; UNESCO 2006; USAID/EQUIP1 2004; USAID/EQUIP2 2006).

A recent qualitative study of teacher quality and teacher professional development in Namibia carried out under the USAID/EQUIP1 program¹ examined teachers' perspectives of education quality, teaching quality, and quality of learning as the first stage of study. In the study, teachers' perspectives on education quality are compared with the perspectives on quality of other stakeholders - principals, parents, and students – in the same schools.² Namibia is a country in which the conditions of rapidly expanding enrolments, active-learning reforms in teaching and learning, and limited resources, as described above, have led to declining quality of education, making the study of interest in other similar countries.

This issue paper focuses on perceptions of education quality, drawing on information from the Namibia study. The paper addresses the question of how teachers and other stakeholders conceptualize and understand education quality, teaching quality, and quality of learning. Teachers' perspectives on quality are particularly important because teachers are the actors primarily responsible for implementing the constructivist, active learning, and student-centered visions of quality that underlie the reform policies of Namibia and many other countries.

Understanding the way in which teachers and other stakeholders perceive education quality, within their own policy context, may help explain success and challenges in the implementation of reform policies and help to identify points of intervention to improve the effectiveness and success of new policies. Given the frequently weak link between policy and its implementation at the school level, understanding how stakeholders understand key aspects of policies should provide valuable information for the planning and program design process.

¹ See Mariana Van Graan and Elizabeth Leu. 2006. *Namibia Pilot Study of Teacher Professional Development, Quality in Education, Teaching, and Learning: Perceptions and Practice*. Washington DC: USAID/EQUIP1.

² The starting point of the Namibia study is to gain an understanding of how a core group of Namibian teachers and other key stakeholders (principals, parents, and students) conceptualize education quality within their own policy context. The study then investigates how stakeholders' perspectives on quality relate to classroom practice. Finally, the study describes and analyzes the ways in which teachers learn and change, with a special focus on the impact of various forms of inservice professional development. Results from the first part of the Namibia study, stakeholders' perceptions of quality, are discussed in this issue paper.

The perceptions of education quality described below are drawn from the Namibia study in which extensive in-depth open-ended interviews were carried out with a core group of 40 grade 4 teachers in 20 rural schools of northern Namibia. Interviews were also carried out with other stakeholders - principals, parents, and students - at the 20 schools. The results of these interviews are organized below around summaries of each stakeholder group's perceptions of education quality in general, quality of teaching, and quality of learning.

STAKEHOLDERS' PERCEPTIONS OF QUALITY EDUCATION, QUALITY TEACHING, AND QUALITY LEARNING

Teachers' Perceptions of Quality

Teachers' General Perceptions of Quality Education

Teachers view quality education primarily in terms of outcomes. First, they focused on learning as a means to achieve students' individual goals: good results and performance leading to the skills for employment in the future. Second, teachers discussed quality of education in terms of fulfilling the needs of the community and country. They described socially appropriate behavior and community commitment as important to the vision of quality education. Teachers emphasized that students should have good manners, should be responsible, and become good citizens. Beyond outcomes, teachers also referred to school-level process and view a positive environment among all members of the community as essential to quality education, including a cooperative relationship among teachers, parents, other schools, and the community. An important additional factor in teachers' responses was the availability of resources - having sufficient resources and teaching materials in the classroom.

Teachers' Perceptions of Quality Teaching

When focusing on perceptions of quality teaching, teachers' emphasis shifted sharply to the need for resources and adequate preparation. Close to half of the teachers defined quality teaching in terms of teacher preparation, citing lesson planning as crucial as is the use of teaching aids and materials in the classroom for students' acquisition of basic subject knowledge and competencies. Teachers frequently talked about the importance of learner-centered education where learners actively participate, ask questions, and contribute to class discussions. Reflecting on their own performance, teachers stressed the importance of continuous assessment to gauge whether students are actually learning and to make adjustments to their teaching strategies to reach students who are at different levels.

Teachers' Perceptions of Quality Learning

Echoing responses to education quality in general, many teachers said they relate quality learning to students' good behavior and social skills. They remarked that learners should be responsible, disciplined, punctual, respectful, and listen well. At the same time, teachers stressed the importance of active participation; they said that learners should ask questions, respond to the teacher, and contribute to class discussions. Another common theme here is good performance. Teachers thought that it is important that learners acquire reading and writing skills, receive good marks, and pass examinations. In addition, teachers believe that learners should be able to apply what they have learned to other situations in life and in the future.

Principals' Perceptions of Quality

Principals' General Perceptions of Quality Education

While many of the same themes emerge in principals' responses about quality education, the main difference is their focus on the role of teachers, citing qualified and competent teachers as essential to quality. They define a qualified teacher as one who prepares lessons thoroughly, uses learner-centered education, uses appropriate materials, knows his or her subject content and knows the students well. Principals echoed teachers' focus on resources, citing the need for sufficient textbooks, teaching materials, and teachers. Much like teachers, principals view the purpose of education in terms of learners' development on both an academic and a social level, stressing the importance of learners meeting the needs of the larger community. Principals believe that the involvement of all stakeholders in the education system is crucial, especially establishing a good relationship between parents and the school.

Principals' Perceptions of Quality Teaching

Almost half of the principals described quality teaching as learner-centered education. Here, principals emphasize learner participation using relevant strategies (role playing, learning by doing, group work). Another common response of principals, when asked about quality teaching, was that teachers must be prepared and use lesson plans and teaching aids, varying their teaching methods and strategies. Principals cited the importance of creating an environment conducive to learning, an environment where learners feel comfortable asking questions and are motivated to participate. They also stressed specific characteristics of teachers such as loving behavior towards and patience with learners.

Principals' Perceptions of Quality Learning

Principals primarily view quality learning in terms of achievement and performance. They stressed academic achievement, learning to read and write and passing subjects with good grades. In addition they related acquiring that knowledge to gaining life skills and obtaining employment in the future. Another consistent theme is principals' focus on social behavior. They think that quality learners are punctual, responsible, listen well, and try to be an example to others. Principals also emphasized learners' active participation in class, stressing that good quality of learning means that learners ask questions, share information with other learners, and are actively involved in all classroom activities.

Parents' Perceptions of Quality

Parents' General Perceptions of Quality Education

Parents primarily relate quality education to exemplary performance of the learners. Parents associated gaining reading and writing skills and passing with good grades with quality. More so than teachers and principals, they stressed that the purpose of learning is to achieve future career goals and employment. Parents also stressed that quality education encourages learners who have good behavior, are disciplined, have good manners, behave well, and respect others. Much like teachers and principals, parents emphasized that resources such as sufficient classrooms, teaching materials, textbooks, and qualified teachers are a fundamental necessity for quality in schools. Another important feature of quality education for parents is cooperation among parents, teachers, and learners.

Parents' Perceptions of Quality Teaching

Parents tend to associate quality teaching with the level of parental involvement that teachers encourage. As examples of quality teaching, parents cited teachers inviting them to the classroom to teach, tell stories, or speak with them. Parents also believe that learner performance and progress are essential to quality teaching. Parents emphasized reading and writing skills, children speaking English, and achieving good grades. They highlighted the importance of teachers informing parents about learners' performance and progress. Parents described regular homework and using varied teaching strategies, like group work and taking learners outside of the class, as good teaching.

Parents' Perceptions of Quality Learning

Parents believe that quality learning has taken place when their children demonstrate practically that they have learned new topics. Parents explained that they become aware of this learning in several ways: when children mention the new topics or ask questions, when teachers hold meetings with parents, and when parents look at children's exercise books and homework. Parents mentioned several topics as important such as HIV/AIDS, sports, mathematics, science, and arts. However, the majority of parents equate learning with English language ability; they believe their children are learning if they are able to read and speak English.

Students' Perceptions of Quality

Students' General Perceptions of Quality

The most important feature of quality education for learners is the characteristics of teachers. Students emphasized that teachers should be kind and friendly, teach with love, tell jokes, and show that they like children. Students frequently said that they value teachers who do not beat them in the classroom. Students also focused on outcomes. They stressed the importance of teachers who explain well and are willing to explain difficult topics in the local language. They also cited as important learning specific topics such as reading, writing, math, art, and English. Interestingly, students also stressed quality outcomes in terms of the future, achieving passing grades and getting jobs.

Students' Perceptions of Quality Teaching

Students' perceptions of quality teaching are virtually the same as their general perceptions of quality. They focused on positive characteristics of teachers: kindness, patience, and the lack of beating in the classroom. Learning specific topics such as reading and writing are also important to students. A distinct feature of quality teaching for students is the use by the teacher of various teaching strategies. Students expressed their preference for teachers who involve students in classroom processes, giving the students opportunities to ask questions and participate in group activities. Importantly, several student groups mentioned the importance of learning to correct their own mistakes.

Students' Perceptions of Quality Learning

Students view learning in terms of structured activities: through tests, graded exercises, and corrected homework assignments. They described learning as taking place when they receive good grades. Somewhat in contradiction to a previous point about the importance of learning to correct their own mistakes, some students said that they learn when the teacher writes corrections on the board and they copy them.

PERCEPTIONS OF QUALITY ACROSS STAKEHOLDER GROUPS

The following summarizes the similarities and differences across all stakeholder groups in the responses on quality of education in general, quality of teaching, and quality of learning.

General Perceptions of Quality Education

When analyzing teachers', principals', parents', and students' responses about general perceptions of quality, similar themes emerge across all of the groups. All of their views concentrate on outcomes of education at various levels. While parents and students focus primarily on the individual level (gaining specific skills and competencies in preparation for future jobs), teachers and principals widen their perspective, including both individual gains and benefits of quality education for the larger community and the country. Teachers, principals, and parents all emphasize sufficient resources and cooperation among all members of the education community as being essential for quality education. They are also in agreement that quality education should promote good behavior. In contrast, principals and parents diverge from the other groups by focusing on teachers. While principals stress the need for qualified and competent teachers, students are more concerned with specific teacher characteristics (kindness, patience, love) which lead to a positive learning environment.

Perceptions of Quality Teaching

Definitions of quality teaching also reveal several commonalities. Teachers and principals are closely aligned, stressing the importance of resources, lesson planning, assessment, and learner-centered teaching in the classroom. In addition, principals highlight that teachers must create an environment in the classroom that is conducive to student learning. Students echo this priority by focusing on positive teacher characteristics that make them feel comfortable. Students also promote the tenets of learner-centered education, expressing their preference for varied teaching strategies and teachers who allow questions and discussion in the classroom. Students and parents share similar views, defining quality teaching in terms of students' performance or progress as well as learning specific topics like English. However, parents also view quality teaching through the lens of their involvement in school such as being invited to visit classes or participate in parent-teacher meetings.

Perceptions of Quality Learning

All four groups - teachers, principals, parents, and students - define quality learning in terms of performance and results. While parents and students focus on learning specific subjects and grades, teachers and parents widen their view to include preparation for future achievement. Teachers and parents also concentrate on learners actively participating in the classroom as well as gaining social skills.

SUMMARY OF POINTS EMPHASIZED BY STAKEHOLDER GROUPS

The following matrix summarizes some of the points emphasized by the different stakeholder groups, noting whether the point is interpreted as an educational input, a desired output of education, or whether it refers to the teaching and learning process or other process interactions at the school level.

	Teachers	Principals	Parents	Students
Quality of Education	<i>Outputs</i> - Academic achievement that leads to jobs; responsibility to community; good behavior <i>Inputs</i> – sufficient resources	<i>Outputs</i> – academic achievement that leads to jobs; responsibility to community; good behavior <i>Inputs</i> – sufficient resources; qualified, competent teachers	<i>Outputs</i> – academic achievement for jobs, responsibility to community; good behavior <i>Inputs</i> – sufficient resources; quality of teachers	<i>Outputs</i> - achievement for jobs <i>Process</i> – kindness of teachers; positive learning environment
Quality of Teaching	<i>Inputs</i> – sufficient resources; lesson planning <i>Process</i> - student-centered education, assessment	<i>Inputs</i> – sufficient resources; lesson planning <i>Process</i> - student-centered education; assessment; good environment	<i>Outputs</i> – Good performance; student progress; good English acquisition <i>Process</i> – Parents' involvement in student learning	<i>Process</i> – feeling comfortable in the class; varied teaching strategies; classroom discussions
Quality of Learning	<i>Outputs</i> – performance and results <i>Process</i> – participatory learning	<i>Outputs</i> – performance and results	<i>Outputs</i> – Performance and results <i>Process</i> – Participatory learning	<i>Outputs</i> – Performance and results

DISCUSSION OF STAKEHOLDERS' PERCEPTIONS OF EDUCATION QUALITY

The Importance of Stakeholder Reflection on Quality

Although all stakeholders have ideas of what constitutes quality of education, with different points of emphasis among groups, many of the responses suggest limited reflection on the dimensions of education quality. The responses stay almost entirely within the well-known language of national policy initiatives. This apparent lack of depth and flexibility of thinking on education quality is surprising, given the explicit role of theory in Namibia's education policies and the strong emphasis within pre-service and in-service teacher development programs on reflection on practice. Teachers and principals, when asked to elaborate beyond the stock phrases, were able to add very little depth or explanation to terms such as "learner-centered education" or "learning to understand."

In a similar observation of the results, stakeholders find it difficult to differentiate among the three dimensions of quality around which the questions were structured: (i) general perspectives on quality; (ii) quality of teaching; and (iii) quality of learning. This, combined with the above observation, suggests a more limited general dialogue than expected on quality within the pre-service and in-service programs, as well as within schools and communities. It also suggests a more limited understanding of the constructivist and active-learning policies that are the foundation of Namibia's reforms.

In the classroom observations that were a part of the Namibia study, further evidence is seen of a relatively narrow grasp of the policies. Teachers are observed to practice some of the forms of active learning and student-centered practice, especially the formation of groups and discussions within groups, with little content that went beyond repetition of facts and information. Thus, there was little evidence of the important central elements of active learning - the use of higher-order thinking skills and cooperative and conceptual learning – in practice.

Using Stakeholders' Perceptions of Quality to Inform and Mobilize Policy

Understanding the way in which teachers and other stakeholders perceive quality of education is important for policy makers, program designers, and program implementers for a number of reasons. Teachers' and other stakeholders' goals for education and interpretation of the meaning of good education can be regarded as a starting point for understanding the impact of policy. There is often a weak link between policies made at central levels and the interpretation and implementation of these policies at local levels (Anderson 2002; Farrell 2002). Policies that do not link strongly with the aspirations and possibilities of those at the local level will have much less likelihood of success than those that are strongly linked to local understanding and aspirations. Dialogue with stakeholders on their perceptions of the basic visions that drive policies, including the vision of education quality that is part of policies, can be a useful tool that creates a two-way communication between more central and more local levels that can both inform and mobilize policy.

Starting by exploring how stakeholders perceive quality education can be a form of policy dialogue that involves local voices in feedback on policies. It can lead to greater understanding and therefore better implementation of policies; it can also enable policy makers to take corrective action in an environment of partnership with those at the local level. Such a process is, or should be, at the heart of decentralization initiatives at the school, classroom, and community level.

In the case of Namibia, we have seen that active-learning and student-centered reforms are articulated by stakeholders, everybody seems to be aware of them, but they appear to be only partially understood and practiced. This is likely to be the case in many countries that are implementing active-learning reforms in the context of rapid expansion and constrained resources. These are all settings in which teachers have had very little preparation and support for internalizing reforms and learning the array of complex practices and learning outcomes associated with them.

The issues raised in the Namibia study lead to the question of why perceptions and practices are weak. On searching for answers to this question, literature was found that identify a misalignment between policy and various aspects of the practice of those policies (NIED 2003). There appears to be a misalignment of theoretical orientation, or interpretation of constructivism, in the approaches of various aspects of the system – policy, curriculum, syllabi, textbooks, the curriculum of pre-service teacher education, the topics and activities of in-service professional development programs - all of which have a direct impact on what teachers do. Teachers, therefore, appear to practice at the nexus of extensive conceptual confusion.

Although there are many possible explanations for gaps in the understanding and practice of policies relating to education quality among the Namibian teachers and stakeholders interviewed, the above is an example of the kind of policy and practice adjustment that might follow from inquiry into perceptions of quality. This example would provide valuable information for the planning process. It also suggests a way of involving those at the local level in policy dialogue and collaborative problem solving which, in itself, would lead to more profound understanding of policies and the visions behind them.

REFERENCES

- ADEA (Association for the Development of Education in Africa). 2004. *ADEA Newsletter* 16 (1).
- ADEA (Association for the Development of Education in Africa). 2005. *The Challenge of Learning: Improving the Quality of Basic Education in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Paris: ADEA.
- Anderson, Stephen E., ed. 2002. *Improving Schools through Teacher Development: Case Studies of the Aga Khan Foundation Projects in East Africa*. Lisse, The Netherlands: Swets and Zeitlinger.
- Boyle, Bill, David While, and Trudy Boyle. 2003. "A Longitudinal Study of Teacher Change: What Makes Professional Development Effective?" Working Paper No. 1. Manchester: University of Manchester, Institute for Political and Economic Governance.
- Craig, Helen J., Richard J. Kraft, Joy du Plessis. 1998. *Teacher Development: Making an Impact*, Washington, DC: ABEL Clearinghouse for Basic Education, AED; Human Development Network, The World Bank.
- Farrell, Joseph P. 2002. "The Aga Khan Foundation Experience Compared with Emerging Alternatives to Formal Schooling." In Stephen E. Anderson (ed.). 2002. *Improving Schools through Teacher Development: Case Studies of the Aga Khan Foundation Projects in East Africa*. Lisse, The Netherlands: Swets and Zeitlinger.
- NIED (National Institute for Educational Development). 2003. *Learner-Centered Education in the Namibian Context: A Conceptual Framework*. Okahandja: NIED.
- UNESCO. 2004. *EFA Global Monitoring Report 2005: Education for All—The Quality Imperative*. Paris: UNESCO.
- UNESCO. 2006. *Teachers and Educational Quality: Monitoring Global Needs for 2015*. Montreal: UNESCO Institute for Statistics: 71.
- USAID/EQUIP1. 2004. *The Patterns and Purposes of School-Based and Cluster Teacher Professional Development Programs*. Washington, DC: USAID, EQUIP1 Program.
- USAID/EQUIP2. 2006. *Stakeholder Collaboration: An Imperative for Education Quality*. Washington, DC: AED, EQUIP2 Program.